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SOME MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING ENGLISH WORK

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In a recent discussion about co-ordinating the work of other teachers with that of the teacher of English both parties seemed to overestimate the English teacher's responsibility. Teachers of English are very likely to magnify their work and to think that any teaching done in the English language belongs in some way to their province. The moment we regard the adequacy or the inadequacy, the appropriateness or the inappropriateness, of the way in which any knowledge is stated, we say that we are regarding the character of the pupil's work in English. There is some truth in this as a mere matter of fact, but in educational discussion we are inclined to draw from it conclusions that are not at all warranted. It is surely not the part of wisdom for the English teacher to assume burdens which do not properly belong to him.

In these days we make education one of the functions of the state, and we justify ourselves by saying that the purpose of education is social rather than individual, that its primary aim is to make a person an efficient member of society. The knowledge that a pupil gets in school must, therefore, have some social value—he must be able to do something with it in the intercourse of life. We test any instruction by the way in which it renders the individual socially efficient, by the way in which one can make practical use of it. The pupil who says that he knows but cannot tell has not been well instructed, he has not been prepared to meet the test which society has a right to impose. From the standpoint of the social theory of education, there are certain misapprehensions regarding the responsibility of the English teacher which are so prevalent that they may well call for a word of protest. We need to emphasize the fact that it is not the special duty of the teacher of English to make the work in all other departments of instruction socially valuable.

A certain teacher of history complained that his pupils did not do well because they were so poor in English, the implication being that if the English work of the school had been better the history work would have been better. He said that his pupils could give him names and dates and facts, but could not give a connected account of anything. The reason for this was plain: they had not been taught to deal with their history in the form of connected narration. The teacher practically expected the pupils to be educated before they came to him; he was not expecting to educate them by the study of history. Why should we regard it as a duty of the teacher of English to teach pupils to talk well about history or physics or biology? If pupils are to talk well about history, they should learn to do it in the history class. It is unreasonable to expect that a pupil shall talk well on a subject which has hitherto been foreign to his mental life simply because in the English class he has been taught something about grammar and composition, has learned to recognize important errors of speech and to regard some of the established rules of writing, and has been caused to read, perhaps with some little degree of appreciation, a few works of good literature.

To talk well is to manage well one's mental resources, to bring out the treasures of one's own mind. A person talks well only when he has something to say about something that seems worth while. Many people speak as if talking well were an ability which could be cultivated entirely apart from any subject-matter, and that when a person has acquired it he can apply it to any subject about which he wishes to talk. But people who talk well about a great variety of things are people who have learned to manage their mental resources well by making both an abundant and a varied use of them. We know that it is hard to carry anything over from one department of study to another. Indeed, the opponents of formal discipline deny that any ability can be cultivated by work done in some other department. It is probably true that we do get something from formal discipline, but we get far less than its advocates have been accustomed to claim. We do get something from the training of the English class which will help the pupil

to talk a little more effectively in the class in history. But the history teacher can never expect his pupils to talk really well about history from the training which they get in the English department. The obligation that rests on the teacher of history is to make his teaching social, to enable the pupil to profit by it in the intercourse of life. Now and then a knowledge of a fact or a date can be made useful, but usually a knowledge of history that has a social value is knowledge that can be well stated. A person gets no credit for knowledge that he cannot bring effectively to the notice of other people. If he cannot talk well about history, people will say that he does not know much history. If his knowledge has no social value, it will get no social recognition. The history teacher has to be a teacher of English expression so far as regards history, or his teaching fails.

The same principle holds good through all the work of the school. The only test that a teacher has that knowledge has not merely stuck to the surface of a pupil's mind and is ready to fall off when it becomes dry, but that it has really been worked over and has come out a usable possession of his own, is the way in which he can express it. Much of our knowledge is born into our minds in words, is treasured up in words, and can be used only by means of words. Expression is the aim and end of a great deal of work which the pupil does in school, which has no connection with that of the English class.

Even on the plane of correctness of speech the English teacher has to share responsibility with the other teachers of the school. Does the pupil in his speech make errors in grammar? If he does, we need first of all to know the reason. If he does not know what is the correct form of expression, the teacher of English is at fault. It is the business of the English teacher to teach him the correct forms of grammar. If he speaks incorrectly through the force of habit, then the teacher who has him is as much at fault as anybody else. It is not to be expected that his habits of speech will be formed in the hour in which he recites in the English classroom. They are being formed wherever he talks, and he gets habits of careful speech only by being required to use careful speech everywhere.

It is too much to expect the teacher of English to repair all the damages that the pupil's speech suffers at the hands of other indifferent teachers.

A second misconception regarding English work is that composition is something that can be taught without regard to content, that pupils can learn to write without writing anything in particular. College-entrance examiners and superintendents and various investigators of pupils' work and abilities sometimes set for tests essays on topics foreign to the thought and interests of many of those who are called on to write them. Of course the pupils cannot write well, and the character of their English work is condemned. In reality, the great trouble with their work is that they have nothing to say. How can they write when there are no ideas in their minds calling for expression? Their technique also suffers. Striving so hard for something to say they naturally forget many things they have been taught regarding the manner of expression; and their critics blame them for neglecting things which they would have attended to if they were using the principles of composition to express something which they thought it desirable to express. I once heard the head of the English department of a prominent college criticize severely the writing of some would-be Freshmen whom he was testing. He gave them a certain theme on which they were required to write an essay of a given length in a given time. It was one of those themes which ignorant teachers think that it would be easy for untrained persons to write about, but which they would never expect to write about themselves. Though he had several books to his credit, I feel sure that the professor could not have written a creditable essay on that subject in the time which he allowed to the class.

There are many pupils who do not write well because they have had so little practice in work which really demanded good writing. Now and then they are called upon to write something for the teacher of English; they are required to write as well as they can, and their work receives at least a modicum of criticism. The teacher tries to beget in them the ability to write well. But the next day they write an examination paper for the teacher of physics and pay little attention to the principles which the English teacher

has been trying to impress upon them. Indeed, why should they? It is a class in physics, not in English. If, however, the teacher of physics demands attention to good English form, if he says that a poorly written paper in the physics class lessens the pupil's credit in physics as much as the same kind of paper would lessen his standing in rhetoric, then the pupil will conclude that good writing is a necessary part of his work everywhere, and he will try as hard to make his papers good in physics as he does in English.

Poor writing may come either from lack of knowledge of subject-matter or from lack of skill in composition. A pupil who really has something to say, who has got knowledge and not merely some of the words in which knowledge is embodied, and who expresses himself poorly, is a pupil who has not profited as he ought by his English instruction. But in criticizing the work of pupils, teachers of all subjects should remember that it is hard to express in good English a lack of knowledge or some scattered fragments of knowledge. Poor writing in the physics class may be the fault of the English teaching, and it may be the fault of the physics teaching. The English teacher should bear no more than his share of the blame. When a pupil's poor writing in any subject comes from the lack of a complete and ready command of the subject, then the teacher of that subject must bear the major part of the responsibility. When a pupil's poor writing comes from a lack of knowledge of the principles of composition, it is the fault of the English teacher.

We need also to remember that, no matter what may be the subject or the occasion, the pupil's writing always depends on the kind of mind he has. When he writes he does not stop to think of the things which he learned in the English class, he makes use of the ideas that come up naturally in his thinking. He follows the habits of thinking and expression that are established in his mind. What there is in his mind, and how his mind will respond to the call which he makes upon it, is determined by all his past training. His English teacher is only one of the influences that have played upon him; perhaps, indeed, the most potent, but after all only one among many. The English teacher is responsible simply in a modest sort of way for the kind of mind the pupil has.

In the English class the pupil learns the principles that underlie correct speech and writing. Whether these principles shall become for him established habits of expression depends not a little on the demand which is made on him to use them, depends on the value which they come to have in work outside of the English class. The pupil will not be likely to lose his grip on things which he finds rated highly wherever he has a chance to use them. The work of the English teacher establishes a proper basis for the pupil's work in writing, but it does not build a great deal of the superstructure. The superstructure is built of the writing the pupil has to do in all his work. If the English teacher is to be held responsible for all the pupil's habits in writing, then the pupil should not be permitted to write except under the direction of the English teacher. If pupils are to go to classes in history and physics with properly established habits of composition, then the classes in history and physics must be postponed until the English teacher has had time to do his work. We recognize the unwisdom of such a course; and in recognizing its unwisdom we recognize also the unwisdom of expecting that the teacher of English shall be held mainly responsible for the pupil's methods of expression in every class.

A third misconception regarding English work is that it is the mission of the teacher of English to get pupils to admire greatly a small list of works of good literature of a particular type, and that when they do not specially care for these books the work is largely a failure. But human life has a wide diversity of feelings and interests, it is embodied in personalities of every kind and type. If literature is an expression of human life, or if literature is an appeal to human life, it must be as varied as the life of which it is the expression or to which it makes appeal. If a certain type of literature does not appeal to a pupil, it may be simply because the outlook of his mind on life gives it a range of interests which that literature does not satisfy.

Not long ago I had a conversation with a friend, a man who has some position and reputation as an educator, and in reply to some enthusiastic words of mine on the value and significance of poetry, he said: "I cannot bring myself to care much for poetry. I do not see why a man should care to read such stuff when he can read

something worth while on as interesting a subject as evolution." Much of what the teacher presses upon the pupil's notice as the most valuable literature this man rejected as mere stuff; and yet he was regarded as a man of much intellectual ability. We need to remember that a pupil who in spite of all our efforts thinks that *The Sketch Book* is dull, and *Evangeline* silly, and *Ivanhoe* slow and uninteresting may still cherish some valuable intellectual interests.

One of the great purposes of the high school is to plant interests. Some interests are started in college and some in the grammar school, but most of the valuable and stimulating interests which people cherish in life had their rise in the high-school period. Most of the success of the high-school teacher is won when he makes pupils have an interest in his subject after school days are over. It is for this reason that the English teacher is so anxious to get pupils interested in literature. If they do not come to some appreciation of it by the time they leave the high school, they may never come to appreciate it at all. The literature with which we are concerned in the English class from the grammar school to the college is mostly literature full of depth and delicacy of feeling or literature characterized by refinement of expression. In many cases these do not appeal strongly to pupils of adolescent age. They are qualities which give literature permanence, but they are not qualities which give it breadth of appeal. We attempt in our English work to satisfy a wide variety of the pupil's concrete interests—his interests in the world and its life about him—by the use of prose fiction. We must not lose sight of the fact that there are a host of pupils whose reading of books, if they read books at all, will not be in the line ordinarily suggested by the English teacher. It is plain that these pupils must largely get from other teachers their interest in good reading.

For example, nature books are among the most popular books of the day. Thoreau, Burroughs, Long, Sharp, Hornaday, and a host of others have been writing books which can be made to have a strong appeal to many young people. Often the English teacher is not specially concerned with such books. He cannot bring them to the notice of the pupils as a result of a vital personal interest in their subject-matter. It is the duty and the privilege of the teacher

of biology to open for his pupils the door to this great realm of literature. What he has to teach may sometimes be dull, and in the scheme of many pupils' lives it may even be of small account. But it may be used to pave the way to a literature that is always full of interest and delight. The work of the teacher of biology bears its best fruit in the lives of many young people by begetting in them a lively desire to read some of the best of the modern literature of nature.

No teacher is more concerned with books than the teacher of history. Books are as much his material as they are the material of the teacher of English. It is his mission to introduce the pupil to many books with which he himself has an intimate acquaintance. If he is wise in his work, he will heed Mr. Roosevelt's advice to regard history as literature; he will see to it that pupils are directed to those works of history which make the subject full of life and interest; he will be on his guard at every turn against books which are mere masses of well-dried information. Every teacher of history knows that it is hard to arouse an interest in the subject which will survive the attack of two or three dull books. If the work of the teacher of history is to be in any way fruitful, if it is to have a social value, it must beget in the pupil a desire to read books on history after the work of the class is over. The teacher of history, from the very nature of his work, is bound to be an inspirer of good reading.

Even when treated in a literary way, there is something tangible and matter-of-fact about history. It deals with the real actions of men, it is concerned with things that actually affected human destiny. It makes, therefore, a strong appeal to minds specially open to concrete interests. A certain pupil, when asked his opinion of some Arthurian poems of Tennyson which the class had been reading, said: "I do not care for them. Everything is said in a strained and artificial way. And besides, they are not true." The English teacher could probably accomplish little in getting this pupil to care for Milton; but the teacher of history might perhaps make a reader of him. We must not fail to remember that the teacher of history has a chance to reach some pupils who are inaccessible to the teacher of English.

There are popular books on physics and astronomy which discuss in a stimulating way some of the greatest problems of the world and of the universe. There is no better proof of the greatness of the human mind than the way in which it can reach out from a few facts close at hand to wonderful and all-embracing conceptions. In the department of economics and civics the brightest minds of the day are at work, and they are giving us some of the most interesting and most potent writing of the time—writing which the intelligent citizen cannot afford to pass by. In these days the world is being brought nearer to us; a host of delightful books of travel are making us familiar with the ends of the earth. We are not obliged to have home-keeping wits, no matter how closely we are held in the grasp of daily routine. It would surely be an undue expansion of the work of the English teacher to ask of him the variety of mental interests that would enable him to introduce pupils to advantage to all this range of books.

The teacher of English is concerned with good books. Indeed, he has to do with no other kind of books, unless it may now and then be textbooks on grammar and rhetoric. It is his business and his pleasure to bring good books to the notice of his pupils, to show them as best he may the stores of delight and inspiration which are here laid up for them. The task seems to him so important, and the books with which he is concerned seem so compelling in their significance, that he forgets there are other books of value which other teachers may bring to the attention of pupils in a more interesting and stimulating way. We need to keep in mind the fact that the great world of books surrounds on every side the interests and activities of the school, that every subject of study is a window which looks out on a delightful landscape, and that it is the duty and the privilege of every teacher of the school to make pupils at home somewhere in this wonderful realm of the mind.

It is, however, on the side of expression that we teachers of English have been subjected to the most hostile criticism. We need to hold fast to the fact that a pupil's use of English is, after all, only in a moderate degree the work of the English teacher; it is the expression of his mind, and is due to all the influences which have molded his mental life. It is our special mission to bring

to his notice the fact that language is everywhere the instrument of expression, and that the better the expression, the more complete and effective the thought. Almost every time a crude, amorphous sentence is worked over into well-organized, expressive language, there is not simply a clearer setting forth of the thought, the thought itself has a kind of new birth, it becomes a different and more worthy thing. When the pupil once gets this into his mind, he will also recognize that a regard for the use of language in every class is a vital part of his thinking on the subject-matter of the class. He will be ready to have his English criticized by the teacher of the class; and he will be critical of his own use of English, because he feels that it is by his use of English that he is mastering the thought. We do not help him to master the thought anywhere except in the subject-matter we are ourselves teaching; but we help to make him feel the value of mastering the thought by bringing it to effective English expression in every subject that he studies.